

Heitkamp-Collins School Food Modernization Act

Serving healthy foods in schools is critically important; childhood obesity rates in our country have tripled over the course of the past three decades. More than 23 million adolescents and children in our country – nearly one in three young people nationwide – are obese or overweight. Improving the nutritional quality of school meals can help fight the obesity epidemic in North Dakota and throughout the country, putting children on strong footing to prevent long term health concerns related to obesity such as diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently updated nutrition standards for school meals to align them with the most up-to-date science. As a result, schools are serving more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat or no-fat dairy options while offering fewer high-fat options and excess calories. While nutritional standards for meals served in schools have increased considerably, support for schools to implement these important changes has lagged behind. Many school kitchens were built decades ago and designed with little capacity beyond reheating and holding food for dining service.

To address the need for upgraded meal preparation equipment, Senators Heidi Heitkamp and Susan Collins (R-ME) have introduced bipartisan legislation to reform and improve food preparation equipment grants under USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. While food preparation equipment grants have been provided to school districts since 1946, the regularity of these grants has been sporadic and unreliable. Senator Heitkamp's legislation, **S. _____, the School Food Modernization Act**, aims to stretch limited resources by improving existing school equipment grant program to better leverage federal resources. At no additional cost to the government, this legislation will:

- **Provide targeted grant assistance** to give school administrators and food service directors the assistance needed to upgrade kitchen infrastructure or to purchase high-quality, durable kitchen equipment such as commercial ovens, steamers, and stoves.
- **Establish a loan assistance program** within USDA to help schools acquire new equipment to prepare and serve healthier, more nutritious meals to students. School administrators and other eligible borrowers can obtain federal guarantees for 90 percent of the loan value needed to construct, remodel, or expand their kitchens, dining, or food storage infrastructure.
- **Strengthen training and provide technical assistance** to aid school food service personnel in meeting the updated nutrition guidelines. Not every school food service employee is equipped with the expertise to comply with healthier meal and food preparation standards. The proposed legislation authorizes USDA to provide support on a competitive basis to highly qualified third-party trainers to develop and administer training and technical assistance.

The Pew Charitable Trusts conducted an extensive study of North Dakota's school food preparation equipment needs and found that **74 percent of school districts in North Dakota need at least one piece of kitchen equipment to better serve healthy meals**. ND school food authorities need approximately \$28 million in food service equipment across all types of kitchens to be able to implement the new lunch requirements. The median estimated cost of equipment needed to meet the new lunch requirements is approximately \$18,000 per school in North Dakota. Additionally, the study found that nationwide **24 percent of schools reported that current equipment is a challenge to meeting nutrition standards**.